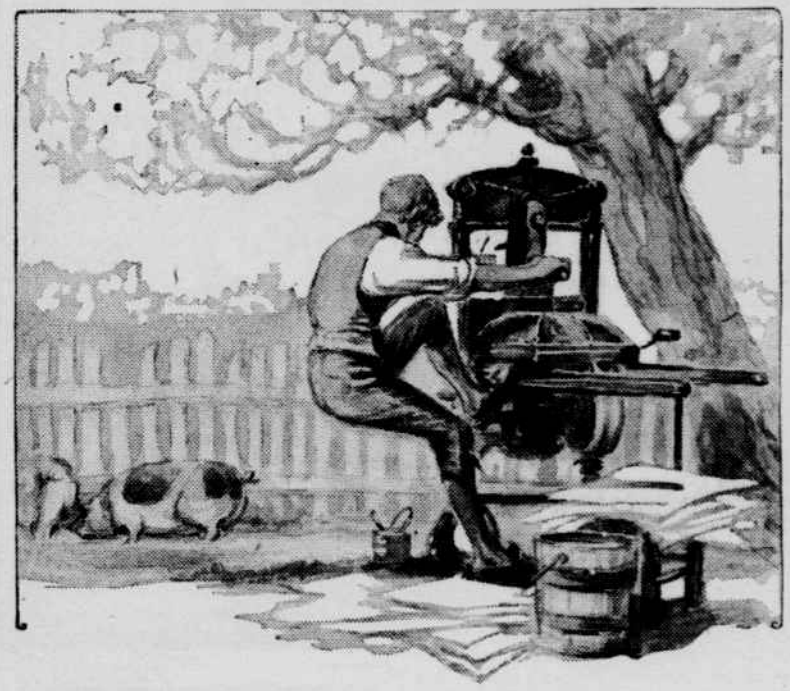
A Child's Story of American Literature

By ALGERNON TASSIN and ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE.

Chapter VI. Two Names and Three Cities.

BOTH "plebeian" and "aristocrat" of letters was Philip Freneau. For the newspapers he wrote so many patriotic ballads and satires that he was called the Poet of the American Revolution. After the war, himself an editor of newspapers, he attacked so savagely the papers and the parties which had different views from himself that Washington called him "that rascal Freneau." But his vigorous "plebeian" writing had nothing about it to keep it fresh after the occasion for it was over. It is by his books of poetry that he still lives for us and these he published himself on his own printing-press in his own back yard. Possibly, we might not have had them otherwise. If a man can publish his own books, he does not have to waste sixteen years, as did Jane Austen, one of the greatest English novelists of this same time, for some one to find out they are worth publishing.

They belong to his earlier years and this is why, although he lived well on into the nineteenth century, we place him in the Revolutionary period. His best pieces are few in number but they are the only ones of the satire period in which we feel the hand of a born artist. If you should read them to-day, you might not think they deserved such great praise. They seem pretty, simple little lyrics, just a bit old-fashioned perhaps. Yet when they were written they were startlingly new-fashioned.



"It is by his books of poetry that Freneau lives for us, and these he published himself on his own printing press in his own backyard."

It is the misfortune of people who create new things that these are soon bettered by people who come after them to whom they have shown the way. Take the steam engine, for instance. That was one of mankind's greatest inventions; yet if you should put the first steam engine by the side of a modern locomotive, you would laugh at it. But it was the first steam engine rather than the last which is the great creative work. Naturally, we cannot go on traveling by the first steam engine simply because it was the first, and no more can we admire with eyes that have long grown used to simplicity and naturalness the first simple and natural songs that were written in our long ago. But it is not fair, is it, to blame or to praise anything quite apart from its own time and circumstances. The creative artist has greatly the advantage of the inventor. His work does not so soon become merely historical. But though the work of the greatest artists may keep fresh hundreds of years, with all of them, we may guess, comes at last the day when people must make certain allowances for it because of the time it was done. We can be sure that even Shakespeare to-day would not write in all ways as he did then.

With Freneau, the simple and human note which he struck in a few of his lyrics was startlingly new. There was a great poet in England who also struck it in the same year, and his songs were more lasting in their new beauty than those of Freneau. This was Robert Burns. But if the freshness of Freneau's songs has not lasted so well, this is no reason why we should not admit that one was just as original and independent as the other in trying to talk simply and unaffectedly while all around him were speaking in an absurdly lofty manner. The fact that Burns and Freneau both began to do so at the same time and independently of each other is very interesting. It showed something the epic writers and most of the magazines were fiercely refusing to see. That American and British literature could not possibly be two radically different things. Each would be modified by its own circumstances, but both must be the expression of the English-speaking race.

Freneau did something no one had ever done in America before. He wrote in a graceful, romantic way of the simple beauties of nature he saw around him. He had been a sailor and he wrote of the sea also. And here he did something nobody in England had ever done before. He may be said to be the first English-speaking poet who wrote of the sea except as a good place to fight naval battles on. But his chief new subject was something nobody could write about except an American. He wrote of the Indians, not about their savagery and cruelty, as some of the first settlers might have written, but about the pathos of their fate and the legends of a fast disappearing race.

First in all of these ways, he was first in another. Several American writers had been praised in England, but he was the first to be borrowed from. Not only did Walter Scott say that one of his songs was the finest of its kind in the language, but he and another English poet liked one of Freneau's lines so well that they used it in poems as their own. Both their praise and their cribbing seem small matters now, but to an American very touchy about its suspicion of literary inferiority they seemed very big then. If only the people who were trying to make an American literature—those epic writers and those magazines—had realized what it was that England saw to praise in Freneau! It was not his deliberately patriotic verse, hard slashing and aggressive; it was when he wrote simply of the simple things he saw and felt. Above all, it was when he was not imitating anybody else.

II.

The truly American thing, the amazing outcrop of magazines which we described

Continued on Following Page.